THE OGDEN STANDARD

THE DIVIDING LINE

And Once David Gordon, Free Agent, Crossed It He Never Wavered, but Went Relentlessly Forward.

By Edward Hungerford

DAVID GORDON, beginning life as a grocer's clerk in Northfield, N. Y., becomes a "free agent" in the business and, crowding his principal competitors out of business, becomes a man of importance in the community. So engrossed is he in money making that he neglects Rhoda Clark, to whom he was engaged. Disheartened by his apparent indifference, her eyesight failing, Rhoda goes to New York city to earn her living, carefully concealing her whereabouts from David. Conscience stricken, he fails in his efforts to locate her, but when he makes a last heart-hungry appeal to her, she telegraphs back her address, with the single word "Come!" She is living in a South Brooklyn boarding house, where Paul Carver, an artist, secretly loves her.

AFTER Rhoda Clark was married to David Gordon he took her to a New York oculist who was a giant in his profession. That specialist gave her a hope that she had not dared to hold for many months. Where Charlesworth stopped the big specialist began. He fretted skilfully with her eyes, then bundled her off to his hospital for a darkened honeymoon.

David went back to Northfield. He had hesitated at leaving his bride even for a day, but she would not have a bit of that.

"No, Davie," she told him, "it would be crowding my happiness—almost too much—and all so sudden."

And so he had gone home, alone, to a business that needed his constant attention in its upbuilding. For David knew that the Gordon Company was but in its infancy. It needed to branch out, to send new twigs, new, slender tendrils of activity across the busy counties of New York State. He was more than merely disposed to let it grow. He was going to put heart and soul in pushing the development of that which was dearer to him than anything else—save Rhoda.

Finally there came the day when he was to take a great step forward. His business had already outgrown the boundaries of the town and of the county, and he was going to jump a hundred miles further north.

There was another poised for such a leap. The big Syracuse wholesaler, Merlheim, who had been crowded out of his best territory in the north country by the failure of Abbott & Bassford, prepared for a telling blow at David Gordon—the prime cause of that misfortune. If that idea of the Northfield grocer's clerk, branching out in a dozen different places, was a good one for Gordon, why not as good for Merlheim? His travelling men were bringing roseate tales from the north country of the success of the Gordon Company. Merlheim prepared to go into the same line—to do battle royal with that young overlord of the north.

And even as David Gordon made preparations for an honest fight in the open Merlheim leaped from the underbrush. He had secured an option at Coytesville, a big town up near the Canada line, upon two grocery stores and was about ready to take them over, when David was apprised of the danger by Rider, his attorney. The attorney outlined a weakness in Merlheim's plan. It was a serious weakness, too, an almost vital flaw that David Gordon could by a trick turn into a fatality.

That was it. It was a trick.

"Not one chance in a thousand of any one being the wiser," urged Rider. "Men do it every day. You can't expect a man to run a big business as he would run a Sunday school."

But David Gordon hesitated. Rider thought that the grocer was turning the question over within his own mind, and insisted. The sharpness of the scheme excited the lawyer's professional zeal.

"There isn't a law on the statute books yet that says a word against it. It's business." He mouthed that "business" proudly, paused for a moment, then hissed:—"Merlheim hasn't done anything to you, has he to make you careful about pricking his skin?"

David Gordon did not answer. He played nervously with the penholders on top of his desk. He was facing a new problem in his business career. Up to now business success had simply meant an infinite attention to all the minute details of his business—David did not know that that had once been called genius—long, long hours of hard work and a determination to succeed. Now, business success seemed to be something quite different. You would not have called David Gordon a religious man in Northfield, or even have ascribed to him a high, moral intent. In fact, the contrary had been quite true ever since he had been one of the few men who had had courage to come out in favor of Sunday golf out at the country club. It was known that David was not a regular churchgoer—such was the disadvantage of a boy early orphaned—but his stand on the Sunday golf gave a distinct shock to the folk of the north country town. And when he had been asked how the country club folk could expect to play golf when the boys down on "the flats" were not allowed to play baseball Sundays, David had responded quickly by saying that he hoped to see the day come when every boy in Northfield could play baseball on Sunday if he so wished. The force of that shock had even washed in upon Stella Bergen's sheltered life, and she had written of what she called David's indiscretion to Rhoda. But when the nurse had read that to David Gordon's wife she had only smiled, as if her gentle heart truly understood.

Making the Plans.

But—to come back to Rider, who sat there facing the silent Gordon—this was not the same thing. It was not the same thing as going to church on Sunday or saying your prayers at night or lots of other rather cumbrous but perfectly simple devices that had been inculcated within him at an early age under the guise of religious training. Those things were all right in their way, and this thing—was—right or wrong. The line marked sharp between them.

"Merlheim's making plans up here," softly whispered Rider.

Merlheim was a dangerous man and David Gordon knew it. Merlheim would be satisfied with nothing less than his extinction, and the trick was easy. It was easy—honorable enough perhaps as business ways were beginning to go throughout the country. Suddenly that marking line blackened in front of David Gordon's eyes. He took a quick grasp of the corners of his desk, smiled his strong, winning smile at the lawyer,

It was a simple little place—a mere story and a half high.

L. A. SHAFER

"Nothing doing, Rider," he said, as coolly as if he had been picking stock from his shelves. "I don't quite see it."

After that Rider might have talked himself black in the face, for David Gordon's mind was set.

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In a week Rider was back and Gordon was greeting him with:—

"Got a new foxy scheme to beat out old Merlheim?"

David felt strong in his own strength. He knew now on which side of the line he stood. Rider faced his client, a wry smile upon his thin lips.

"This scheme will stand Bible test," he said. "Merlheim's having trouble getting hold of money. He's had to ask for an extension of his contract to take over that Coytesville concern. They've let me know that if you will come up with the money tomorrow—well, your money will beat out Syracuse promises. You'll have to go up yourself. He's a fussy old fellow and he'll have it no other way."

That, at least, was decent business, and David did not have to even look for that sharply marked dividing line.

"I will go if Coytesville insists," he laughed. "I will meet you at the nine o'clock train in the morning."

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But Rider was hardly out of the store before they brought a telegram to David from Rhoda's physician. Her case was heading rapidly—unexpected developments necessitated an operation within forty-eight hours—there was no grave danger, the oculist said, but Mrs. Gordon wanted to see her husband again. It was a long telegram—twice as long if you read between the lines. David Gordon read it there with greatest force. In an instant Coytesville—Merlheim—his precious business were completely gone from his mind. Was this to be Rhoda's last chance to look upon her husband? He got Rider upon the telephone—they were beginning to be quite metropolitan in Northfield.

Was David Gordon clean out of his wits? Merlheim would have the opening after all. Merlheim would be in their territory, and it was so easy just now to shut him out.

David Gordon silenced the lawyer. "You should have known, Rider," he said in a low voice, "that my wife's happiness and wishes are more to me than anything else in the world."

And so it was that Merlheim came to Coytesville, came there while David Gordon sat beside a darkened bedside in New York, giving strength and giving courage in a crucial time.

"We'll give the Gordon company the run of their lives," Merlheim was announcing to Coytesville. "I am going to every town that has a Gordon store and I am going to plant a store next door to theirs, no matter what the rent."

And then he secretly planned to do more—to imitate as closely as he dared the ingenious yellow and blue signs that made a Gordon grocery store easily distinguishable from a long distance, to copy the profuse advertising of the Northfield firm, to hire its best men. There were certainly no foolish scruples about Merlheim.

And while Merlheim boasted in Coytesville David Gordon had forgotten that there had ever been a grocery business. He was holding a woman's hand tight, giving her strength and encouragement at the time she needed both. Once she turned toward him there in the dark.

"Isn't it all costing a lot, dear?" she asked.

"Not very much, girl," was his reply. "Nothing for what we are going to reap."

The Cost of a Lie.

That was the first time that David Gordon had ever lied to Rhoda. It was costing a lot. The fee that the great oculist had demanded before he would open his case of knives was a quarter of David's income for the year, and David had promised to double it if the surgeon was successful. That took a lot of money and just at the time when he needed every cent in his business, but David knew that any price was cheap. Think of it—once before he had lacked the few miserable dollars to give his mother the simplest hospital treatment.

"If—if it shouldn't come right," she stammered up to him, "you will never let me go alone in the dark, will you, David?"

In that single moment that her courage wavered David Gordon felt that an inky blackness was upon him, himself. He took the last of his resourceful courage and steadied himself—the little canoe was running in deep rapids and needed a good steersman.

"You are coming out into the sunshine, Rhoda," he told her slowly and prayed God that he told her naught but truth, "and when you come out into the sunshine you will find me waiting—our own little house there in Dexter—the servants, the carriages, the team—mind you, girl—the team and your own little pony cart"——

He could say no more. It was all a great dream. Words failed him and he bent low over the counterpane. The big oculist saw him there an hour later and did not disturb him for a time as he fumbled with the bandages. Then he touched David Gordon gently upon the shoulder.

"I'm going to Europe at your expense, Mr. Gordon," he laughed, "for I've turned the hardest trick of my life."

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When David Gordon went out into the sunlight of Broadway—glaring light after the darkened, silent room—he felt that it was sunshine.

He walked the two miles to his hotel and hardly felt that his feet had once touched the pavement. A beggar saw the joy on his face and shot a battered hat out in front of him. David Gordon dropped a yellow backed bill into it and the beggar was speechless—but only for a moment. He showed the bill to a newsboy, and all the rest of the way down Broadway David Gordon was besieged. He gave out all the money that he had in his pocket and a policeman had to come and chase off his followers. He wondered if David Gordon was drunk.

David was drunk—drunk with joy. He was still delirious in his happiness when the hotel clerk handed him a letter from Rider. It bore a special delivery stamp—plainly an urgent letter. David tore the end off the envelope.

Merlheim was going to advance on Northfield. Merlheim was taking a store right next to the main store of the Gordon Company, preparing to copy their signs, their window displays, their advertising, to steal away their best men. Rider's letter read more blue than the deep tinged paper upon which it was written. David Gordon laughed when he had finished it, laughed as though it had been crammed chock-a-block with good news.

"Keep a steady hand, Rider," he said aloud, as if his counsellor stood at his elbow, "and we'll give them hell," but all he wired to the lawyer was:—

"Thank God! Mrs. Gordon's operation was successful."

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And all the while that Rider would have forced the plans for the fight against the Merlheim concern upon him, David Gordon was giving his chief attention to the preparations for making a certain little house in Dexter street habitable for the delayed homecoming of a bride. He fussed over every detail with the constant attention of a fussy man, and David Gordon was never such.

Not until the Merlheim concern was ready to move in next door to him did David Gordon take apparent notice of it. In fact, the day that they opened their doors for business—with much ado—Rhoda came home, and David spent that entire day in greeting her, in showing her the little home that was to be all hers. It was a simple little place—a mere story and a half high—but its great Gothic gables peered at one through the mass of foliage that surrounded it in a singularly homelike way. A narrow brick paved path led up to the front door from the street and the boxwood and the old fashioned flowers crowded close upon it all the way. Rhoda loved the gardens and the quaint weathered look of the old house; she had keen interest in the new fangled things, the wonderful conveniences and the electric lights. She adored the house. Within it her child was born, and long years after she had ceased to look at life through its mullioned casements she realized that it was the one real home of her existence.

The Store a Success.

The Merlheim store was a success at the outset; right there in David Gordon's Northfield. The Syracuse wholesaler prepared to open a branch over on the north side of the river, and then David Gordon summoned Rider into consultation with him. When David was done talking Rider looked at him, not speaking for a full minute. When he did speak the lawyer said:—

"It's risky. The law doesn't always wink at that sort of thing."

David Gordon looked at him steadily.

"I've come to a point where I've got to take risks or get out of business," he said, slowly. "You go ahead. If you can't handle it yourself get some capable help. I'll back you. The one thing I won't forgive you is a fall down. I'll back you to the limit—through thick and thin—as long as you win. Do you understand?"

Rider understood. David Gordon had crossed the dividing line.

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Once he had crossed that line David Gordon's path never once swayed. He made it his business to drive Merlheim out of Northfield and for more than two years he bent every energy to that end. It was different fighting Merlheim, who was keen, active and vindictive, from fighting that miserable old derelict of an Abraham Bassford. For nearly two years Merlheim laughed at the attacks of his rival. He met them by opening two branches in Northfield, finally by opening such a butcher shop as the North Country had not before known.

The butcher shop was a bad move. The Gordon Company went into the meat business; it never seemed to find enough avenues for the expression of its activities. Only a little time before David had opened a canning factory on the outskirts of the town, and, oddly enough, the recipes that they followed were those that Rhoda had followed in her own home, a precious inheritance to her from her mother.

Merlheim answered the butcher shop attack by going further into David Gordon's territory. His sharply imitative signs and window fronts went, as he had threatened, in every case next door to a Gordon store. He would pay twice the normal rental to shoulder one of David's branches. Merlheim laughed. Abraham Bassford, who had gone to work for him, laughed. They would teach that upstart.

Then, of a sudden, things began to go wrong with Merlheim's store. David Gordon hired away his manager by a trick—the dividing line was far crossed now. Then there was trouble about the meat shipments that came through from the West. No matter how high the grade of hog or steer that his agents might buy on the hoof in Chicago or Kansas City, it was poor grade that came trampling out of the stock cars at the Northfield freight house. His customers complained. Merlheim swore. David Gordon did not swear. He laughed. He told his agents to buy cheaper hogs, cheaper steers, to buy bulls and Jerseys—anything to fill the stock cars of Merlheim.

For David Gordon had a railroad yardmaster in a great city that perched above the wind swept shore of a lake in his secret employ. Night after night the stock cars bound through for the Merlheim and the Gordon companies were halted in that yard and a good part of their contents exchanged. No wonder that Merlheim swore, roundly denounced his agents in the West for lying to him, cut down their bills. They responded by bringing suits in good round figures. When Merlheim was served with the papers in the last of their suits he swooned—right in the office of the American Hotel at Northfield. They carried him up stairs to his room sick of a raging fever. Four days later, in the confusion that had attended his sudden illness, one of his checks went to protest at the Second National Bank of Northfield. The check was for $1,850 and there was a little more than $1,800 in Merlheim's account, but that made little difference with Serton Bristow, the president of the bank. Secretly he was sorry for poor Merlheim—only a few months before he overcertified his checks by several thousands of dollars. He had little sympathy for David Gordon, who might have married Ethel Bristow and did not. But Serton Bristow was almost as helpless as Merlheim. David Gordon had acquired control of the Northfield banks, and Serton Bristow, nominally president of the biggest of all of them, had little more authority than the janitor. He was obliged to quickly publish Merlheim's bad credit to the whole State. One bank down in Syracuse which tried to stand by him was threatened with a run. After that a foolish servant carried the news to Merlheim just as he was coming out from the fever. He ran to the window of his hotel room and plunged through it to the pavement.

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"Poor Merlheim," said David Gordon after he had finished reading of the funeral; "he attempted too much, too devilish much. I don't know that it was up to me to do it, but I have put his widow on a pension for the rest of her life."

The Worried Face.

Rhoda looked at her husband across the breakfast table, the love for him fairly aglow. Dear Davie, he must be taking his rival's death very hard. The lines about his face were more drawn than she had ever before seen them; there was a twitching of mouth and of hands that she did not like. Her faith in her husband was unlimited. It remained so long after Merlheim had become history, when all the stores that he had worked so hard to establish bore the trade mark of the Gordon Company. It remained so all the while that David Gordon steadily extended his business—it had long since crossed over into New England, south and west into Pennsylvania and Ohio.

It remained until one fatal day—she remembered the day because it was her little girl's sixth birthday—when she chanced to go into the great canning factory alone. She flattered herself that she kept an interest in her husband's business. In truth she knew as little of the real affairs of the Gordon Company as the veriest outsider. It was a complicated organism—one company within another—a realty company for acquiring property and holding it, an operating company for the stores, another company for the complicated premium system, a dozen manufacturing companies.

"If they ever catch you on the hip," Rider had told David Gordon after the entire intricate structure had been completed, "they will have to get going some. We've a good ten years' start on the best of them."

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It was the first time that Rhoda's child had ever gone within her father's factory. It was filled with fascinations for her—the whirr of belt and shaft, the quick, precise movements of the hundreds of intricate machines held her fascinated.

"All this row is on the banana puddings," said the superintendent, who was taking them through. "That big advertising campaign of ours has certainly started them going. They're just fighting out in Idaho and Montana to get Gordon's peerless banana puddings. They're a hit."

"Where are the bananas?" asked the little girl, and Rhoda echoed that question. She remembered that it took many bananas to make a big pudding; for such an output as this they must be buying them by the trainload. The foreman answered their question by slyly putting his finger to his lips. Then he led them to a locked room, a room lined with rows of shelves and bottles, like a chemical laboratory. He lifted a great bottle from one shelf.

"There is enough banana in that bottle to flavor pudding for a whole Montana county," said he, and he let them whiff at the bottle's neck. The fruity odor was unmistakable.

"Where do you reduce the bananas to this syrup?" asked Rhoda.

The foreman hesitated. He felt that he had gone too far, but Rhoda pressed her point. He stammered out an answer.

"Truth to tell, Mrs. Gordon, we couldn't make the puddings for ten cents a package and ever have them even see a banana. It's all in the chemicals and the heads of those bright little college kiddies out there in the laboratories."

Rhoda felt the room begin to swing. She did not understand. It sounded dishonorable, and she first thought David could not have known or he would have discharged them all. It was not like David.

"Mr. Gordon's a great chemist as well as a great business man. He says that in ten years we'll be making coffee here without coffee beans and that"——

The man kept talking, but Rhoda heard him not. She had heard more than enough. She went home with Florence wondering what had made so much trouble there at the factory. Rhoda would ask David all about it at supper that night. She knew that he would not lie to her.

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But when she did ask him, after they were alone in their cosey little library, he gave her little satisfaction. He evaded her questions in a way that was not at all like the old David, and finally he told her the whole science of modern canning. It appalled her. He tried, vainly, to set her fears at rest. Canners from all over the country were coming and admiring his factory; the trade papers all called it a model plant; he had the most advanced ideas in force for the comfort of his people—rest rooms, pensions. Why could not Rhoda be reasonable and accept a situation that other folks accepted?

But Rhoda was obdurate. She could not make her conscience see the virtue of the methods of their factory. Finally she turned upon David Gordon with this:—

"If these chemicals are all right," she asked bluntly, "why do you not say on the package that you are using them?"

"Gad, girl," was his reply, "they're thinking of framing up a law of that sort down at Washington next session."

He did not add that he had that week subscribed $5,000 toward a fund for the throttling of that yet unborn statute.

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The first rift had come into their life. Each studiously ignored it, but it had left its indelible mark. And only a little later David Gordon came to his wife and said that he was going to build a big new house—the finest house in all of Northfield.

Rhoda interposed a gentle objection, a woman's objection. She had loved her little gabled cottage from the beginning. But David Gordon only shook his head and said:—

"They are going to make me president of the new Chamber of Commerce, and the president of the Chamber of Commerce ought to have a show place on the main street of the city." He laughed at the whimsicality of it all. "We loved this little place when it was the best we could have; now we will have a great house, planned as you may wish to plan it."

He kissed her lovingly, laughed at her and with her—the house should have all the pet housewifely ideas of which she had dreamed for years—she should plan its every detail.

"And to think, Rhoda dear, that all we wanted once was a hired girl and a horse and carriage."

For that instant he was like the David Gordon of other days. She lifted her delicate mouth and let him kiss it again and again and again—for the sake of those other days.

But that night, after he had gone down town to receive the honor of election as president of the little city's first Chamber of Commerce, she threw herself across her little girl's bed and cried herself to sleep.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)